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Viewing cable 09KUALALUMPUR1014, FARAH PANDITH'S VISIT SHOWS MANY FACES OF ISLAM IN MALAYSIA

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
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SUBJECT: FARAH PANDITH'S VISIT SHOWS MANY FACES OF ISLAM IN MALAYSIA

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 716 -- CANING PUNISHMENT POSTPONED
B. KUALA LUMPUR 980 -- AMB VERVEER'S VISIT TO
MALAYSIA

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Special Representative to Muslim Communities (SRMC) Farah Pandith visited Malaysia to begin engagement with civil society and establish contacts with government officials, politicians, teachers, students, and NGOs on December 13-14. SRMC Pandith explained her recent appointment as the Special Representative to Muslim Communities, emphasizing the President's and the Secretary's policy of creating new partnerships with Muslim communities around world. SRMC Pandith was well received by the Malaysians--both as a champion of Islam and for her efforts in promoting a new relationship based on mutual interest and mutual respect between the U.S. and Muslims around the world--but concerns over U.S. foreign policy remained apparent in meetings with politicians, government officials and students. SRMC Pandith established solid connections during her initial visit and several organizations expressed interest in remaining in contact with her. Post hopes that she will be able to capitalize on her initial success with a return visit in 2010. End Summary.

SISTERS IN ISLAM, SISTERS IN THOUGHT

12. (SBU) On December 13, Farah Pandith met with the pioneers of the local NGO Sisters in Islam (SIS): Zainah Anwar (Founder), Hamidah Marican (Executive Director), and Norani Othman (co-founder) and discussed a wide range of social and religious issues pertaining to Islam. Zainah explained that she started the organization 20 years ago out of concern that Muslim women in the country were being discriminated against, especially in issues concerning Family Law (marriage, divorces, custody), which is the purview of Syariah courts. According to Zainah, "Everything was argued in the name of religion and no one questioned it."

13. (SBU) Sisters in Islam attracts criticism from conservative Muslim groups in Malaysia because SIS argues for fresh interpretations of the Quran, and is seen as backing a Western approach toward equal rights for women. There have been numerous calls to ban the organization, including from the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS). Pandith asked about SIS' relationship with GOM and civil society. Zainah replied that the NGO has been subject to police harassment for criticizing the caning sentence of Kartika, a Muslim woman arrested by religious police for drinking beer (reftels). SIS is very concerned over rumors that members could face trial on sedition charges.

14. (SBU) SRMC Pandith welcomed SIS's courageous approach to issues such as women's rights and suggested that SIS try to penetrate the Malay youth demographic by using comics and graphic novels. SIS members were interested in the idea and requested technological assistance and further contact with Pandith.

VISIT TO MADRASAH SCHOOL

15. (U) To get closer to grassroots Muslim life in Malaysia, SRMC Pandith visited the Al-Amin Madrasah School located in Bangi, a one hour drive from Kuala Lumpur in the shadows of the National University of Malaysia, on December 14. Founded in 1989, this private school with 100 teachers and 893 primary and secondary students is part of a network of madrasahs comprising 35 schools and 8,000 students and is chaired by Ustaz Megat Mohamed Amin. Amin, who recently returned from a "life-changing" multi-regional International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) on secondary and elementary education in the U.S., was instrumental in establishing in 2008 an English Language Access Microscholarship program for 60 Muslim students to learn after-school English for two

years at a madrasah in the conservative state of Kelantan.

¶16. (U) During the discussions, a school board member noted that the madrasah taught the government-required curriculum in addition to Islamic courses. SRMC Pandith complimented the team on its broad curriculum and encouraged sharing the model with other Muslim communities. In response to Ustaz Amin's comment that the school could do better in encouraging interactions with non-Muslim communities, SRMC Pandith suggested the expansion of the madrasah's social entrepreneurship-based community development projects to include non-Muslim schools in the local community.

POLITICIANS SHIFT CONVERSATION FROM ISLAM TO OBAMA, PALESTINE

¶17. (SBU) SRMC Pandith, DCM Rob Rapson, and Poloffs met with politicians from each of the three predominantly Muslim parties over lunch: the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the People's Justice Party (PKR), and the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS). All three politicians agreed that Islam is compatible with democracy. UMNO Member of Parliament (MP) Nur Jazlan stated that the ongoing "Islamization process" in Malaysia started "around 30 years ago." (Note: this was a thinly veiled suggestion that it started after then-Islamist activist Anwar Ibrahim joined UMNO in 1982. End Note.) Jazlan stated that once the process started, UMNO and the government "could not turn back the clock" and therefore UMNO was forced to embrace Islamization. Jazlan candidly stated if UMNO did not embrace the challenge, the party would be accused of being "un-Islamic." Jazlan conceded that he is not happy with what is happening, but is unable to stop it due to political considerations. PAS Youth Secretary General Kamaruzaman Mohamad, not a member of Parliament, added that PAS is committed to democracy until "we capture power."

¶18. (SBU) PKR MP Yusmadi Yusuf welcomed President Obama's Cairo speech but expressed concern from PKR leaders, including party advisor Anwar Ibrahim, that Obama seems to be "speaking on behalf of Muslims," and that this slant is not going down well among them. (Comment: post does not feel that this is an accurate assessment of Anwar's views. End Comment.) Yusmadi felt that President Obama should instead address the problems in the "Muslim world" as an outsider. He nonetheless stressed that Muslims in Malaysia welcomed the new administration which he felt "is genuinely concerned" about the "Muslim world" compared to the previous administration. Yusmadi also suggested that the U.S. should formulate an economic model for Muslim countries which he claimed "would endear the U.S. among Muslims." He cited Southern Thailand as a possible region to implement this economic model. Kamaruzaman echoed Yusmadi's view that there is a genuine optimism among Muslims over U.S. policies after the Obama administration came to power, but pointed out that Muslims will always have problems with the U.S. so long as the Palestinian issue is not resolved. He criticized the U.S. for being a staunch and uncompromising ally of Israel. Until the U.S. can become more of an "honest broker", said Karamuzaman, the U.S. will always be viewed with suspicion by Muslims.

RELIGIOUS MINISTRY: TOLERATING RELIGION, IF DONE THEIR WAY

¶19. (SBU) SRMC Pandith met with Minister for Religious Affairs Jamil Khir Baharom, who immediately reflected upon his positive experience attending graduate school in the U.S., and elaborating on the similarities between the U.S. and Malaysia. Jamil noted that both countries are multi-racial and commented on how other races have the freedom to celebrate their religion in Malaysia. The Minister then went on to explain that Malaysia practices Sunni Islam exclusively, noting that Shia and Sufism are not allowed in Malaysia. According to Jamil, "it's better to have one school of thought instead of many."

¶10. (SBU) The Minister noted that Islamic education is

compulsory for all Muslims, starting with primary and secondary students with continuation in public universities. He recalled the poor Islamic education system in Malaysia prior to independence and felt privileged that the Federal Government took over the education system by outlining the school syllabus and having it standardized. The teachings also differed from one village to another, which led to different schools of thought. Jamil added that the Ministry of Higher Education collaborates with the Religious Affairs Department in setting up the syllabus, and now many Malaysian scholars study abroad, especially in Egypt and Jordan. Jamil did not elaborate on other activities that the Ministry engages in, though he did say that one of them is to monitor sermons given after Friday prayers.

ENERGIZING THE NEXT GENERATION OF GLOBAL MUSLIMS

¶11. (U) At a round table discussion with Islamic scholars, academics, students, Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program alumni, and a local entrepreneur, SRMC Pandith emphasized her role as convener, facilitator, and intellectual partner listening to the next generation and encouraging initiatives for the common good. She stressed the diversity of Islam and the desire to build relationships across Muslim communities over time and based on mutual interest and respect. She noted the power of traditional and social media networking to spread information, expand engagement, and reach more global youth interested in positive change.

¶12. (U) Faisal Hassan, President of the YES Alumni Association of Malaysia, spoke of his group's diverse activities including community service and development projects (promoting peace, building leadership skills, developing English-language programs), organizing a worldwide YES Alumni Conference in Malaysia in November 2009, participating in the AFS World Congress in Kuala Lumpur in November 2009, and networking with other alumni abroad to share best practices and experiences. SRMC Pandith encouraged YES to expand its network even further through social media and to consider working with other entrepreneurs to "scale up" their activities and have an even greater impact around the world.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP'S POSSIBILITIES AT THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL

¶13. (U) SRMC Pandith spoke about the power of entrepreneurship for Muslim communities at the roundtable, mentioning entrepreneurship not only in its traditional business context, but also in terms of innovation (technology and ideas) and social entrepreneurship (giving back through community development). She stressed that examples of Muslim entrepreneurship successes highlight "the good side of Muslim communities around the world." Malaysian entrepreneur Dhakshinamoorthy "Dash" Balakrishnan, CEO of Warisan Global, shared his personal experiences at the grassroots level in hiring over 800 Malaysian Muslim graduates to engage villagers in entrepreneurial projects making greater use of the Internet and to create markets for their cottage industry products. He also noted the success during the recent Global Entrepreneurship Week that he organized. He concluded that entrepreneurship has broken both mental and racial barriers and that partnership-based entrepreneurial activities have created stronger levels of trust between various communities in Malaysia.

INTERVIEW WITH FEATURES REPORTER, BERITA HARIAN

¶14. (U) Following her roundtable with university students and faculty, SRMC Pandith held an exclusive interview with Berita Harian, one of KL's major Malay-language dailies with nationwide weekday circulation of nearly 200,000. In the interview, SRMC Pandith explained why she had chosen to visit Malaysia, echoing President Obama's description in his Cairo speech, of Malaysia as a "progressive Muslim-majority country" and one that must not be ignored. She also talked

about why Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is putting an emphasis on grassroots and people to people connections. She also spoke about her position as the Special Representative, her interest in convening dialogues and facilitating networking among like-minded people who support the "diversity of Islam" and want to make a difference. She mentioned how the U.S. sees its role as a convener and facilitator, and as an intellectual partner with Muslim communities around the world. SRMC Pandith stressed that the U.S. is open to new ideas and mentioned her hope that proposals for undertakings between the U.S. and Malaysia can come from a renewed dialogue with Malaysians in partnership with the U.S. Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. When asked whether public perception and treatment of Muslims in the U.S. had improved since 2001, SRMC Pandith replied that "As is the case in many societies around the world) there is still a need for education about diversity and mutual respect," but stressed that "Muslims in the United States have more freedom to practice their religion than anywhere else in the world." (Note: A feature article from this interview will be published shortly in Berita Harian's weekend edition. End note.)

JAMAH ISLAH MALAYSIA (JIM): AN NGO WITH CONSERVATIVE IDEALS

¶15. (SBU) At a December 14 dinner meeting with SRMC Pandith, President of the conservative Islamic NGO Jamaah Islah Malaysia (JIM) Zaid Kamaruddin and colleagues explained that the 10,000-member organization, many of whom are spread at all levels of the government strata, was dedicated to strengthening Muslim values in Malaysia. He and fellow believers set up the NGO in 1982 after Anwar Ibrahim, who was then leader of the Muslim Youth Organization (ABIM) decided to join the ruling political party, UMNO. Zaid and others thought the struggle for Muslim values had to remain outside the government. Zaid said JIM sought to offer an alternative vision to what he called the "liberal western" system of government that Malaysia had adopted. Democracy was a significant achievement, but Islamic government "by God" would be better. In addition, materialistic western values meant citizens lacked ethical discipline, so democracy required extensive regulation and a robust police force to keep society under control.

¶16. (SBU) In contrast, under Islamic rule citizens could be confident that rulers (who could be chosen through democratic elections, perhaps) would act within the bounds of behavior as laid out in the Koran and Sunnah, and citizens were law-abiding because of their strong religious beliefs. Asked whether his description of Islamic rule was Utopian, Zaid answered that, on the contrary, such rule had existed under the Caliphs. Realistically, Zaid concluded, Muslims in Malaysia could not expect to establish Islamic rule in the near term, nor was JIM advocating such a step, but there was a need to offer a competing vision to that of the west.

¶17. (SBU) We asked Zaid about two current controversies in Malaysia with religious overtones: the Catholic Herald's effort to overturn a law restricting the use of the word "Allah" to Muslims, and the pending caning of a Muslim woman, Kartika, for drinking alcohol, noting that these cases attracted attention outside of Malaysia. Zaid said that the law restricting the use of "Allah" was not based on Muslim beliefs, but nevertheless a law was on the books and JIM would not risk alienating other Muslim groups by defending the Catholic Herald. On the Kartika case, he said there should be no controversy: she had broken Syariah law in Pahang state, and the required penalty was caning.

¶18. (U) SRMC Pandith cleared this cable.
KEITH